American Jailed For Spying

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BELGRADE, Nov. 26—An American citizen has been sentenced to seven years in prison on espionage charges for having photographed a Yugoslav sugar refinery, it was learned here today.

Lazlo Toth, 43, who is a naturalized U.S. citizen, was arrested last summer while he and his family were visiting his home town of Vrbas, about 70 miles north of here. His trial, held in secret, ended Nov. 6 and the U.S. embassy has been denied consular access to him since his arrest.

U.S. Ambassador Laurence H. Silberman has vigorously protested denial of consular access and repeatedly raised the matter with senior Yugoslav officials in an effort to prevent the arrest from becoming a major political incident.

Senior U.S. officials are believed to be baffled by Belgrade's tough stance, especially since relations between the two countries have been improving considerably in recent months.

"Obviously amongst friends we cannot talk about retaliatory steps," Silberman told American reporters today. "But obviously (the Toth case) can't help but have an impact on our relations."

Continued Yugoslav firmness may prompt the State Department to issue an official warning against travel to Yugoslavia by all Yugoslav-Americans, with the exception of those who have legally renounced their former Yugoslav citizenship. More serious measures may be forthcoming if both sides fail to reach a compromise.

Toth, an engineer and sugar specialist, is manager of a laboratory of Great Western Sugar Co. of Denver. He was arrested when he took pictures of the sugar refinery, which is located in Vrbas. The refinery is equipped by West German machinery and Toth was touring the facility with the permission of its authorities.

He had been employed at one time by the refinery before he emigrated to the United States. He is not believed to be associated with any emigre organizations.

(A spokesman for Great Western in Denver said Toth was sentenced for "economic espionage." Toth was on "a vacation trip" with his wife and daughter when the incident occurred, the spokesman told United Press International.)

The arrest was originally thought to be a part of a massive security campaign against pro-Moscow opponents of President Tito, which had been under way for several months.

However, political observers here speculated that the arrest of a U.S. citizen and the extraordinarily stiff penalty given to him may be politically thinking, may be using the Toth case as a source of pressure on the Ford administration to curb activities in the United States of various anti-Tito emigre organizations.

A consular agreement concluded between the United States and the kingdom of Serbia nearly a century ago is still being juridically enforced here. This agreement however does not deal with the issue of dual nationality, which has plagued Yugoslav-American relations in recent years.